espite what many people believe due to longstanding and inaccurate accounts in history books and movies such as Disney's *Pocahontas*, the true story of Pocahontas is not one of a young Native Powhatan woman with a raccoon friend who dove off of mountain-like cliffs off the coasts of Virginia. (Note: there are no cliffs on the coast of Virginia.)

The true story of Pocahontas is a tale of tragedy and heartbreak.

Credit: Disney's Pocahontas -Buena Vista/courtesy Everett

Collection.

It is time to bust up the misconceptions perpetuated over 400 years regarding the young daughter of Powhatan chief Wahunsenaca. The truth—gathered from years of extensive research of the historical record, books, and oral histories from self-identified descendants of Pocahontas and tribal peoples of Virginia —is not for the faint of heart.

A Warning To Our Readers: Mature Subject Matter Not Suitable for Children

The story of Pocahontas is a tragic tale of a young Native girl who was kidnapped, sexually assaulted and allegedly murdered by those who were supposed to keep her safe.

Pocahontas' Mother, Also Named Pocahontas, Died While Giving Birth to Her

This is in many historical accounts, though not always. It is important to note that Pocahontas was born to her mother, named Pocahontas and her father Wahunsenaca, (sometimes spelled Wahunsenakah), who later became the paramount chief.

Her name at birth was Matoaka, which means "flower between two streams," and according to Mattaponi history was likely given to her because she was born between the two rivers of Mattaponi and Pamunkey (York).

An image of a young Pocahontas.

Due to his wife’s death, Wahunsenaca was devastated and little Matoaka became his favorite because she looked like her mother. She was raised by her aunts and other women of the Mattaponi tribe at Werowocomoco.

As was the custom at the time, as the Paramount Chief of the Powhatan Chiefdom, Wahunsenaca had other wives from the other villages and little Matoaka had many loving brothers and sisters.

Because of his lingering grief and due to the reminder she gave to him of her mother, Wahunsenaca often called his daughter the endearing name of Pocahontas.

John Smith Came to the Powhatan When Pocahontas Was about 9 or 10

According to Mattaponi oral history, little Matoaka was possibly about 10 years old when John Smith and English colonists arrived in Tsenacomoca in the spring of 1607. John Smith was about 27 years old. They were never married nor involved.

Pocahontas Never Saved the Life of John Smith

The children of the Powhatan were very closely watched and cared for by all members of the tribe. Since Pocahontas was living with her father, Chief Powhatan Wahunsenaca, at Werowocomoco, and because she was the daughter of a

chief, she was likely held to even stricter standards and provided with more structure and cultural training.

When she was a child, John Smith and English colonists stayed near the Powhatan on the nearby Jamestown Island, but later began to explore outlying areas. Smith was feared by many Native people because he was known to enter villages and put guns to heads of chiefs demanding food and supplies.

In the winter of 1607, the colonists and Smith met with Powhatan warriors and Smith was captured by the chief's younger brother.

Because the English and Powhatan feared the actions of the Spanish, they formed an alliance. Eventually and according to oral history and contemporary written accounts by the Mattaponi, Wahunsenaca grew to like Smith, eventually offering him the position of 'werowance' or leader of the colonists as recognized by the Powhatan as well as a much more livable area for his people with great access to game and seafood.

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Credit: A portrait of Pocahontas saving the life of John Smith with Father Wahunsenaca. Oral history from the descendants of Pocahontas dictates such a thing could never have happened.

Years later, Smith alleged that Pocahontas saved his life in the four-day process of becoming a werowance. But according to Mattaponi oral and contemporary written accounts, there would be no reason to kill a man designated to receive an honor by the chief.

Additionally, children were not allowed to attend any sort of religious ritual similar to the werowance ceremony.

She could not have thrown herself in front of John Smith to beg for his life for two reasons: Smith was being honored, and she would not have been allowed to be there.

Pocahontas Never Defied Her Father to Bring Food to John Smith or Jamestown

Credit: Captain John Smith. (Photo courtesy Library of Congress)

Some historical accounts claim Pocahontas defied her father to bring food to the colonists of Jamestown. According to the history of the Mattaponi tribe as well as simple facts, these claims could not be true.

Jamestown was 12 miles from Werowocomoco and the likelihood that a 10-year-old daughter would travel alone are inconsistent with Powhatan culture. She as well as other tribal members did travel to Jamestown, but as a gesture of peace.

Additionally, travel to Jamestown required crossing large bodies of water and the use of 400-pound dugout canoes. It took a team of strong people to lift them into the water.

It is likely Pocahontas served as a symbol of peace by simply being present as a child among her people to show no ill intentions when her people met with the Jamestown settlers.

Pocahontas Did Not Sneak Into Jamestown to Warn John Smith About a Death Plot

In 1608 and 1609, John Smith’s role as the werowance (chief) of the colonists had taken an ugly turn. The colonists made inadequate attempts to plant crops to harvest, and Smith violently demanded supplies from surrounding villages after once again holding a gun to the heads of village leaders.

Accounts from Mattaponi histories tell of one tribal woman proclaiming to Smith, “You call yourself a Christian, yet you leave us with no food for the winter.”

Pocahontas’ father, who had befriended Smith, once said to him, “I have not treated any of my werowances as well as you, yet you are the worst werowance I have!”

Smith claimed Wahunsenaca wanted to kill him, and asserted he knew of the plot because Pocahontas had come to warn him.

Due to the icy conditions at the time and because of the many watchful eyes attending to the daughter of a chief, as well as gestures of peace by the Powhatan to include additional provisions, Native historians rebuff the historical claims of Smith as completely fabricated.

To further prove Smith’s tale was a fabrication, a letter by Smith written in 1608 was published without Smith’s knowledge. The letter makes no claim of Pocahontas trying to save his life on two separate occasions. It wasn’t until Smith published his book *General Historie of Virginia* in 1624 that he claimed Pocahontas had twice saved his life. Any of the people who could have refuted Smith’s claims by that time were no longer alive.

As Colonists Terrorized Native People, Pocahontas Married and Became Pregnant

The early 1600s were a horrible time for tribes near Werowocomoco. Native tribes once comfortable wearing

clothing suitable for summer — including exposed breasts for Native women and little or nothing for children — found themselves being sexually targeted by English colonists.

Young children were targets of rape and Native women in the tribe would resort to offering themselves to men to keep their children safe. The Powhatan people were shocked by the behavior and were horrified that the English government offered them no protections.

In the midst of the horrible and atrocious acts committed by the colonists, Matoaka was coming of age. During a ceremony, Matoaka was to choose a new name, and she selected Pocahontas, after her mother. During a courtship dance, it is likely she danced with Kocoum, the younger brother of Potowomac Chief Japazaw.

She married the young warrior at about 14 and soon became pregnant.

It was at this time rumors began to surface that colonists planned to kidnap the beloved chief’s daughter Pocahontas.

Pocahontas Was Kidnapped, Her Husband Was Murdered and She Was Forced to Give Up Her First Child

When Pocahontas was about 15 or 16, the rumors of a possible kidnapping had become more of a threat and she was living with her husband Kocoum at his Potowomac village.

An English colonist by the name of Captain Samuel Argall sought to find her, thinking that a captured daughter of the chief would thwart attacks by Natives.

Hearing of her whereabouts, Argall came to the village and demanded Chief Japazaw, brother of Pocahontas' husband, to give up Pocahontas or suffer violence against his village. Overcome with grief at a horrible choice, he relented with a hopeful promise that she would only be gone temporarily. That was a promise Argall quickly broke.

Before Argall left the village, he gave Chief Japazaw a copper pot. He later claimed to have traded it for her. This "trade" is still taught by historians. This is akin to the way that Smith 'traded' for corn by holding a gun to the heads of chiefs.

Before leaving the village, Pocahontas had to give her baby (referred to as little Kocoum) to the women of the village. Trapped on board an English ship, she was not aware that when her husband returned to their village, he was killed by the colonists.

The tribal chiefs of the Powhatan never retaliated for the kidnapping of Pocahontas, fearing they would be captured and that the beloved daughter of the chief and the "Peace Symbol of the Powhatan" might be harmed.

Pocahontas Was Raped While in Captivity and Became Pregnant With Her Second Child

According to Dr. Linwood Custalow, a historian of the Mattaponi Tribe and the custodian of the sacred oral history

of Pocahontas, soon after being kidnapped, she was suffering from depression and was growing more fearful and withdrawn. Her extreme anxiety was so severe her English captors allowed Pocahontas' eldest sister Mattachanna and her husband Uttamattamakin to come to her aid.

Dr. Custalow writes in his book, *The True Story of Pocahontas, The Other Side of History*, that when Mattachanna and her husband Uttamattamakin, a spiritual advisor to Chief Wahunsenaca, Pocahontas confided in her sister.

When Mattachanna and Uttamattamakin arrived at Jamestown, Pocahontas confided in that she had been raped. Mattaponi sacred oral history is very clear on this: Pocahontas was raped. It is possible that it had been done to her by more than one person and repeatedly. My grandfather and other teachers of Mattaponi oral history said that Pocahontas was raped.

The possibility of being taken captive was a danger to be aware of in Powhatan Society, but rape was not tolerated. Rape in Powhatan Society was virtually unheard of because the punishment for such actions was so severe. Powhatan society did not have prisons. Punishment for wrongful actions often consisted of banishment from the tribe.

Historians differ on where Pocahontas was held, but tribal historians believe she was likely held in Jamestown, but was relocated to Henrico when she was pregnant.

Pocahontas had a son, Thomas.

John Rolfe Married Pocahontas to Create a Native Alliance in Tobacco Production

Mattaponi history is clear that Pocahontas had a son out of wedlock, Thomas, prior to her marriage to John Rolfe. Prior to that marriage, the colonists pressed Pocahontas to become “civilized” and often told her that her father did not love her because he had not come to rescue her.

Pocahontas often tore off her English clothes, because they were uncomfortable. Eventually, Pocahontas was converted to Christianity and took the name Rebecca.

Credit: Pocahontas as Rebecca Rolfe.

In the midst of her captivity, the English colony of Jamestown was failing. John Rolfe was under a 1616 deadline to become profitable or lose the support of England. Rolfe sought to learn tobacco curing techniques from the Powhatan, but curing tobacco was a sacred practice not to be shared with outsiders. Realizing the political strength of aligning himself with the tribe, he eventually married Pocahontas.

Though some historians claim Pocahontas and Rolfe married for love, it is not a certainty, as Pocahontas was never allowed to see her family, child or father after being kidnapped.

Credit: The Pocahontas wedding with John Rolfe. (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress)

After the two were married, the Powhatan spiritual leaders and family to Pocahontas shared the curing practice with Rolfe. Soon afterward, Rolfe’s tobacco was a sensation in England, which saved the colony of Jamestown, as they finally found a profitable venture.

The Powhatan tribal lands were now highly sought after for the tobacco trade and the tribe suffered great losses of life and land at the hands of greedy tobacco farmers.

It is worth noting that though it was custom for a Powhatan father to give away his daughter at a marriage, Wahunsenaca did not attend the wedding of his daughter to Rolfe for fear of being captured or killed. He did send a strand of pearls as a gift.

Credit: Pocahontas Portrait by Thomas Sully. c. 1852. (Photo via Virginia Historical Society)

As Dr. Custalow wrote in *The True Story of Pocahontas, The Other Side of History*:

Although Wahunsenaca did not attend the wedding, we know through sacred Mattaponi oral history that he gave Pocahontas a pearl necklace as a wedding gift. The pearls were obtained from the Chesapeake Bay oyster beds. The necklace was notable for the large size and fine quality of the pearls. Pearls of the size were rare, making them a suitable gift for a paramount chief's daughter. No mention of this necklace has been found in the English writings, but a portrait of Pocahontas wearing a pearl necklace used to hang in the Gov.'s mansion in Richmond.

Pocahontas Was Brought to England To Raise Money and Was Then Likely Murdered

Rumors of the colonist's desire to bring Pocahontas made its way to the Powhatan, who feared for her well-being and considered an attempt to rescue her. But Wahunsenaca feared his daughter might be harmed.

Rebecca "Pocahontas" Rolfe traveled to England with John Rolfe, her son Thomas Rolfe, Captain John Argall (who had kidnapped her) and several Native tribal members, including her sister Mattachanna.

Though many settlers were committing atrocities against the Powhatan, many elites in England did not approve of the mistreatment of natives. The bringing of Pocahontas to England to show friendship with Native nations was a key to continued financial support for the colonists.

Credit: Pocahontas at Court of King James. (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress)

According to the accounts of Mattachanna, she realized that she was being used and desperately desired to return home to her father and little Kocoum. During her travels in England, Pocahontas did meet John Smith and expressed outrage due to the mistreatment of his position as leader of the colonists and the betrayal to the Powhatan people.

After the journey and showing off of Pocahontas to the English elites, plans were made to return to Virginia in the spring of 1617. According to a recounting by Mattachanna, she was in good health while in England and on the ship preparing to go home.

Shortly after dinner with Rolfe and Argall, she vomited and died. Those tribal members who were accompanying her, including her sister Mattachanna, said she was in previously good health and assessed she must have been poisoned due to her sudden death.

According to Mattaponi oral history, many of the Native people accompanying Pocahontas were sold as servants or carnival attractions or sent to Bermuda if they became pregnant after being raped and sold into slavery.

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Credit: Pocah
ontas grave, St. Georges Church Kent, United Kingdom.
(Photo via Wikipedia)

Pocahontas was just under 21 at the time of her death. Instead of being taken home and laid to rest with her father, Rolfe and Argall took her to Gravesend, England, where she was buried at Saint George’s Church, March 21, 1617. Though Virginia tribes have requested that her remains

returned for repatriation, officials in England say the exact whereabouts of her remains are not known.

Wahunsenaca learned from Mattachanna that his beloved daughter had died but had never betrayed her people, as some historians claim. Heartbroken that he had not ever rescued his daughter, he died from grief less than a year after the death of Pocahontas.

The Descendants of Pocahontas

Oral histories of both the Mattaponi and Patawomeck and historical references say she mothered two children, Thomas Rolfe, who was left in England after the death of his mother, and ‘little Kocoum.’

According to Deyo, Little Kocoum was the name that Dr. Linwood Custalow used for the purpose of his book to reference a small child whose name was not yet known. In the sacred oral history of the Mattaponi, the child was raised by the Patawomeck Tribe. The name of that child was passed down in the Patawomeck oral history was discovered to be Ka-Okee, a daughter.

This lineage to Ka-Okee includes the world-famous entertainer Wayne Newton, a member of the Virginia state-recognized Powhatan Patawomeck tribe.

Thomas Rolfe stayed in England and was educated there. He later returned to the Powhatan as an adult. He was married and had many descendants.